JESSIE: A Young Girl I Once Knew
A Personal Memoir Of Jessie Gilbert (1987-2006)

In May 1997, I returned to competitive chess after a twenty year absence, winning tournament after tournament until I found my level. On October 24 of the following year I sat down on Board 22 to play my second round game in a Major Tournament at a small congress in Richmond. Sitting opposite was a shy, freckle faced eleven year old girl. I beat her with something to spare and went on to claim a share of the first prize.

On November 7, I sat down opposite the same girl at International Students' House; this time I won the tournament outright, beating her more convincingly than at Richmond. I think it is safe to say that at that point in time I thought she had more personality than chess talent, but that was no insult, because she had a lot of personality. Her name was Jessie Gilbert, and I saw quite a lot of her over the next three years until I lost interest in over the board chess and finally fell out of love with the game for the second time in my life.

Jessie was a regular on the London and South East chess circuit where chaperoned by her doting Mum Angela and accompanied by her elder sister Samantha, younger sister Anni and later baby Josie, she picked up a fair share of prizes, but no one could have foreseen what would happen in January 1999 when she stunned the chess world by winning the Women's World Amateur title by virtue of finishing the highest placed female competitor in the World Amateur Championship at Hastings. I was particularly pleased for her, not just because she was such a nice kid but because I now had a 100% record against a reigning world champion. How many club players can boast that?

To be scrupulously fair, this title sounds a lot more prestigious than it is. To begin with Jessie was one of only four female entries. I had played in the same tournament the previous year scoring a disappointing 4 points out of 11, but calculated that if I had played as well as I had in the stronger Challengers where I scored 4½ out of 11, I would have been the highest placed native player.

Nevertheless, Jessie's achievement was not to be belittled; she admitted later that she was terrified she would lose every single game, and as at that time in addition to her tender age she was only a weak to moderate if slowly improving club player, her performance at Hastings was truly remarkable.

On the strength of that performance she was awarded a chess scholarship, and jetted off to New York to train under the acclaimed Edmar Mednis. She did not disappoint, and although she was never a chess prodigy in the same sense as Luke McShane or David Howell, her results were consistent enough to merit regular selection for both county and national teams.

Jessie had what might be termed the Diana effect in reverse; it was said of Diana Princess of Wales that she filled any room she walked into. Jessie was precisely the opposite, but you always knew she was there because she was so unimposing. She dressed inevitably in jeans and trainers; I don't think I ever saw her in a dress, but she was no tomboy; you had no doubt she was a girl and glad to be one.

Like other older players I gave her the odd bit of advice, but always peer to peer, never in an avuncular or patronising fashion. I told her she should play king's pawn openings to strengthen her tactics, but she never did, and once I gave her a copy of an article on how to avoid blunders I'd written for *Chess Post*. She thanked me for that. Jessie was cut from the same cloth as her mother, who as well as highly intelligent was equally instantly likeable, and non-judgmental.

After more or less giving up chess I lost touch with and track of Jessie, but I was pleasantly surprised to see a position from one of her games published in the *Evening Standard* of March 21, 2006. Columnist Leonard Barden – who coincidentally uses the same Internet Café as me – referred to her as "Surrey medical student [Jessie] Gilbert". I still had her E-mail address and nearly sent her a message congratulating her both on beating the number 9 player in India and on achieving her other ambition, to study medicine. As long as I live I will regret not sending that E-mail, but I thought the last person she would want to hear from was a player thirty years her senior whom she had now left far behind in chessic prowess.

It was only after her tragic death that I heard she had recently scored two other fine victories, a win at her home club Coulsdon in December 2005 against English Grandmaster Danny Gormally, the outright Hastings Challengers winner in 2002-03, and perhaps most impressive of all, outright first in the inaugural Korean International Championship in February 2006. I don't think Jessie ever had any illusions about champing at Kasparov's heels, but she could certainly have become British Ladies Champion, and aspired to even greater international triumphs. And who knows what she could have achieved in her academic pursuits?

Altogether I played Jessie five times; at the reception after her funeral, her mother told me she had regarded me as a friend. I know too she had thought of me as a challenge. The fourth time we played was in a match at Crystal Palace in January 2000; she missed a more or less forced win in the ending and had to settle for a draw on adjudication, although I thought she deserved a full point. I told her she was getting better while I was only getting older, at which point she paid me a bizarre compliment: "You're my Hitler", she said.

She won our last encounter, which was another Crystal Palace-Coulsdon match, but if I am no longer her Hitler, she will always be my Diana, because from the moment I heard of her death, she has never been off my mind.

RIP Jessie
Below: Jessie's original score of our fourth (drawn) game, reproduced by kind permission of Angela Gilbert.

White/~~Black~~ v. Alexander, Baron ..... Grade ..149.....

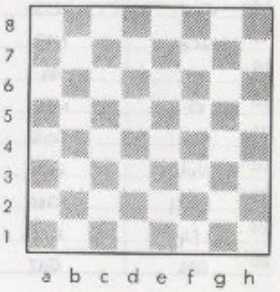
Event .Coulsdon A vs. Crystal Palace A .....

1	d4	d5	26	dxc5	Nxg3
2	c4	e6	27	Nxg3	Nc7
3	Nc3	Nf6	28	Qd3	Qe6
4	cxd5	cxd5	29	Qh7+	Kf8
5	Bg5	Be7	30	Qh8+	Ke7
6	Qc2	0-0	31	Nf5+	Kd7
7	e3	Nbd7	32	Qxh6	Qxh6
8	Ba3	c6	33	Nxh6	Na6
9	Nge2	Re8	34	Nxf7	Nxb4
10	0-0	Nf8	(35)	Bf5+	Ke7
11	Rb1	a5	36	Na6	Na6
12	a3	h6	37	½ - ½	
13	Bh4	b5	38		
14	b4	Bb7	39		
15	Nc1	axb4	40		
16	axb4	g5	41		
17	Bg3	Nh5	42		
18	N3e2	Ra4	43		
19	Qd2	Ne6	44		
20	Be2	Ra3	45		
21	Nb3	Qd7	46		
22	Ra1	Rxa1	47		
23	Rxa1	Ra8	48		
24	Rxa8+	Bxa8	49		
25	Nc5	Bxc5	50		

Opening ..QGD - Exchange Variation..... Game No: 7

Date ..24./1./2000..... Own Grade .137.....

51		66	
52		67	
53		68	
54		69	
55		70	
56		71	
57		72	
58		73	
59		74	
60		75	
61		76	
62		77	
63		78	
64		79	
65		80	



Position after W/B move number: